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The anxiety of being Australian: Modernity, consumerism and identity politics in Michelle de Kretser's *The Lost Dog*

Born to an English father and an Indian mother, Tom Loxley, the protagonist of Michelle de Kretser's 2007 novel *The Lost Dog*, moves to Australia from India as a teenager in the 1970s. Tom struggles to build and sustain relationships in the "host" country, and his ties with Australia are characterized by feelings of anxiousness and a profound sense of loss. The narratological present of the novel is set in the year 2001, and as the adult Tom watches his elderly mother's health deteriorate, and when his beloved dog goes missing, his anxiety about his positioning in Australian society becomes amplified. "The loss of roots, home, or motherland" and its attendant malaise are recurring themes in diasporic literature and, like a number of other South Asian-Australian novels, including Suneeta Peres da Costa's *Homework*, Chandani Lokugé's *If the Moon Smiled* and *Softly, As I Leave You* as well as De Kretser's *Questions of Travel*, *The Lost Dog* is explicitly concerned with these issues (Boehmer, 2005: 200). It grapples in-depth with "the experiences of exclusion, alienation, and resistance in the new homeland", resulting from the immigrant's racialized identity and from the trauma wrought by physical displacement, which have come to exemplify the diasporic predicament in postcolonial writings (Bhatia, 2007: 79). But, as I will show, in *The Lost Dog*, De Kretser's portrayal of Tom's tense ties with Australia and with other human beings also firmly situates immigrant experiences in the context of global capitalist modernity in general, and consumerism in particular. I will demonstrate that De Kretser's depiction of Tom's identity crisis reveals the complex ways in which the notions of inclusion and exclusion, loss and belonging in contemporary Australia are inextricably tied in with the workings of global consumer capitalism.

“Modernity” and “modern” are recurring words in *The Lost Dog*; the novel is striking also for its many passages devoted to the practice of consumerism and to Tom’s attempts to make sense of his own and other people’s spending habits. The narrator and Tom are preoccupied not only with the dizzying array of shiny consumer products but also with the discarded, “valueless things” that are characteristic of modern society, such as “a pineapple-topped swizzle stick, a hair slide, a condom wrapper, two dead matches, a doll’s dismembered arm” (De Kretser, 2009 [2007]: 199).¹

Anthony Giddens sees “modernity” as being “inherently globalizing” (1990: 63), and, according to this view, globalization necessarily entails “the worldwide spread of the processes and forces of modernity, such as capitalism, rationalization, democratization, liberalism and industrialisation” (Hopper, 2007: 95). As Marijke Denger has pointed out, in bringing to the fore the tensions between conflicting constructions of Australianness, the novel paints

a picture of Australia as a nation constantly moving along the dividing line between the aspiration to form an integral but essentially faceless part of globalized modernity and its historical and geographical uniqueness, which is perceived as an impediment to its up-to-dateness. (2016: 291)

But the aspect of contemporary Australia that very clearly aligns it to globalized modernity is its joyful embracement of consumerism. Leslie Sklair has argued that “the motor of global capitalism” is fuelled by the “culture-ideology of consumerism” which seeks to “persuade people to consume not simply to satisfy their biological and other modest needs but in response to artificially created desires in order to perpetuate the accumulation of capital for private profit” (2002: 62–3). Moreover, as Colin Campbell points out, consumption in modern society “is characterised as much by the extent to which individuals dispose of goods as to the extent to which they acquire them.

Consumerism involves a high turnover of goods, not merely a high level of acquisition” (1999: 147). Tom perceives being modern and being a consumer as central to contemporary Australian identity and, as we will see, his sense of alienation and exclusion is deeply informed by his ambivalent feelings towards the practice of consumption and its wider moral implications.

Australian anxieties

Facing destitution in India in 1972, as Tom’s parents Iris and Arthur ponder their choices, they arrive at Australia by a process of elimination and a series of negatives:

“Not America.”

“Not England,” countered Arthur.

“Not England,” agreed Iris. “Why should we suffer The European Winter?” (19).

Like his parents’, Tom’s understanding of what constitutes Australianness will also come to be defined as much by what Australia is, as by what the country is not. While evoking Australia’s “love affair with modernity” in an interview, De Kretser (2007: n.p.) has contended that “we [Australians] are very keen to differentiate ourselves from older civilisations”. Even though Tom bristles at essentialist attitudes spawned by dominant discourses on Australianness, which entail “internal sameness and external difference or otherness” (Werbner, 1997: 228), he appears to subscribe to a fairly narrow definition of what constitutes an acceptable Australian identity, which, to a large extent, he sees in opposition to his Indian past. Tom is also impatient with his artist friend Nelly Zhang’s attachment to her Chinese roots and considers it as being incompatible with her Australian nationality. Catriona Elder argues that stories about “being Australian are always made in relation to other ways of being that are marked as similar or different” (2007: 10). Moreover, these “stories” are “underpinned by feelings of anxiety” which

are in turn beset not only by “issues of race and ethnicity” as Elder points out, but are also informed, as I will demonstrate, by related questions of consumer identity politics (2007: 10).

Migration to Australia demotes the young Tom to the lower rungs of several social hierarchies. He faces numerous “humiliations” at school because of his skin colour and is subjected to cruel racist slurs: “What about you fuck off back to the other black bastards?” (25). Being “slight” as well as “bad at sports”, Tom is also the antithesis of hegemonic Australian masculinity (40). As Jackie Hogan explains, not only “have white male figures dominated in the national imaginary, but masculine pursuits, values and characteristics, more generally, have been exalted in images of Australianness” (2010: 65). Tom’s penchant for intellectual rather than physical pursuits further distance him from the “circle of legitimacy”, and contribute to his “marginalized” or “subordinated” masculinity (Connell, 2005: 79–81).

Moreover, migration to Australia brings in its wake a loss of class status for the Loxleys: despite his father being able to find gainful employment in Australia and despite amassing, within a few weeks of their arrival, “possessions undreamed of in austere India”, Tom realises that in Australia “the Loxleys were poor” (115). The serious financial problems faced by his family in India notwithstanding, Tom had been “accustomed to thinking of himself as rich”, because poverty in India meant being “roofless, filthy, starved and diseased” (115); he effectively has to recalibrate his understanding of seemingly fixed notions of wealth and deprivation. The teenaged Tom is struck also by the easy availability in Melbourne of amenities which would have been considered a luxury in Mangalore: he describes at length to Nelly his joy at “arriving in Australia and finding clean water piped into every kitchen, every drinking fountain. He had drunk glass after glass of it: an everyday miracle on tap” (134).

Arguably, for Tom the most significant cultural shift that comes about as a result of immigration has to do with the act of consumption. India of the 1960s and early 1970s was a “semi-planned semi-socialist economy based on import substitution”, where brands were not yet a significant cultural phenomenon (Vicziány, 2004: 31). “The socialist rhetoric of the pre-liberalization Indian state which was centred around/on the tropes of giving and sharing” (Maitra, 2014: 73) contrasts sharply with the consumerism of 1970s Australia and the even more “gluttonous” turn that it takes over time: “There was more stuff around, more people buying it [...] it was as if endless wealth had been converted by a malicious spell into endless want” (71). Soon after his arrival in Australia and “long before he encountered theories of capitalism and commodity production, he grasped that things — desiring and acquiring and discarding them — were the life-blood of the new world” (116).

On the one hand, then, Tom is very clearly a figure who, in the words of De Kretser, has been “wounded” by his journey to Australia and has effectively “lost his childhood”.² He finds himself living in a country “where he had no continuity with the dead; and being childless, no connection to the future” (82). Moreover, following immigration, Tom was compelled to adopt the role of the adult in the family. His parents were reduced to a second childhood in Australia where they were required to come to terms with an entirely new way of life, and Tom became painfully conscious of no longer being “the child of the house. The obvious displacement in space had obscured a more subtle dislocation in time” (227). On the other hand, Tom is shown to be grateful for having “escaped into abundance” (116), and the sense of loss resulting from immigration very much coexists with a sense of plenitude that he experiences as a teenager, with “silver escalators” suddenly carrying him “to new heights of consumption” (160).

Unlike a hegemonic racialized identity, modernity and consumerism are Australian traits that he finds relatively easy to adopt:

Tom Loxley [...] wished to lead a modern life. By which he meant a life that was meant to be trivial, that had filtered out the dull sediment of tradition and inherited responsibilities; a life shiny as invention, that floated and gleamed. In that respect he was an exemplary Australian. (145)

Indeed, one of the most important aspects of “modernity” that seem to most preoccupy the narrator as well as Tom has to do with the freedom that it represents from “fixed and traditional ways of thinking” (De Kretser, 2007: n.p.). De Kretser has argued in an interview that this freedom can be “joyful” but also necessitates a “free-floatingness”, inhibiting an individual’s capacity to address “serious things that claim our attention” (2007: n.p.). Consumerism functions as a supremely effective distraction and, as Susan Sontag has contended, the “space reserved for being serious is hard to come by in a modern society, whose chief model of a public space is the mega-store” (2003: 119). But, like his ex-wife and colleagues, Tom clearly has no desire to join the ranks of those Australians who “eat McDonald’s and pay to have their flesh tanned orange” (101). Instead, he wishes to embody a highbrow variety of consumerism, or “conspicuous consumption” to deploy Veblen’s terminology, which distinguishes him from the masses and shows that he is able to “discriminate with some nicety between the noble and the ignoble in consumable goods” (1992 [1899]: 64). Tom’s unease with consumerism, in particular with the profusion of waste that it brings in its wake, as I discuss below, coexists with his active participation in advanced capitalism which, to an extent, seems to free him from engaging with more uncomfortable truths about his lack of Australianness. To a certain degree, he has bought into the logic underpinning the free market, according to which, as Christos Tsiolkas notes, “we are broken, unfulfilled, and

that only by filling our homes, our souls, ourselves with needless junk of consumption can we ever hope to attain some approximation of the whole” (2008: 38). Moreover, Tom is reassured by the country’s participation in, and membership of, something bigger — a global capitalist “script” which, for him, is proof of Australia, and by extension his own life, being up-to-date, relevant and modern: “There was comfort to be derived from this sense that the nation was keeping up with the great elsewhere. What claim does a new world have on our imagination if it falls out of date?” (101).

While constructing himself as a particular kind of consumer, one who is discerning and discriminating, Tom also appears to commodify human beings and interpersonal relationships. Consider, for instance, his reaction to a gift given by his mother to him and his ex-wife Karen when they got married. He is struck and embarrassed by the contrast between the “supermarket china” and his “gleaming, expensive” wife (69). Tom’s use of the adjective “expensive” to describe Karen encapsulates his sense of her as a valuable possession: her “worth” in his eyes being a product of her upper-class white Australian identity which in turn manifests itself through her highbrow tastes, bringing clearly into focus his mother’s less “sophisticated” ones. As Pierre Bourdieu has argued:

Taste is the basis of all that one has — people and things — and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others. Tastes (i.e. manifested preferences) are the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference. It is no accident that, when they have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. (2010 [1984]: 49)

Tom appears to have aligned his consumer preferences with his wife’s upper-class, “legitimate” ones, so as to alleviate his doubtful positioning within Australian society (Bourdieu, 2010 [1984]: 8). As such, adopting a particular mode of consumption allows

him to acquire some semblance of a collective, shared identity (even if it is one based on exclusiveness) in a society where he otherwise feels alienated. As Jean Baudrillard argues, “consuming is something one never does alone [...] one enters, rather, into a generalised system of exchange and production of coded values where, in spite of themselves, all consumers are involved with all others” (1998: 78). His failed marriage with Karen testifies to the limitations of relationships built on shared consumer identities, but this is something that Tom will only come to realize later.

Tom also perceives specific consumer habits and practices as central to Australian identity: he is embarrassed, and indeed “ashamed for her” as he watches Nelly haggling with stallholders: “He always paid whatever was asked, not wishing to appear *typically Asian*” and, by extension, not wishing to appear unAustralian (73, emphasis in the original). Tom often sees life in binaries, while realizing also how deceptive these dichotomous categories can be: Australian/unAustralian, authentic/inauthentic, cheap/expensive. He is deeply conscious of the fact that despite being able to sell her work “steadily”, Nelly is “thrifty in ways uncommon in her cosseted generation: a single bag yielding two or even three cups of tea, meagre leftovers scraped together and refrigerated” (48). Food, as De Kretser’s novel underscores, lies at the heart of contemporary consumer identities and Tom finds Nelly’s thriftiness as well as her indifference and lack of discernment with respect to food disconcerting. As Veblen points out, the failure to consume “in due quantity and quality” what are deemed to be “excellent goods”, becomes “a mark of inferiority and demerit” (1992 [1899]: 64). Paradoxically, Tom also finds Nelly’s lack of discernment commendable, and his ambivalent attitude towards highbrow consumerism is informed by the abject poverty and deprivation that he saw around him while growing up in India:

Nelly lived on awful food, squares of soft white bread, instant noodles, tinned soup [...] It was one of the things that endeared her to Tom. Early in life, he had encountered too many people who did not have enough to eat. It remained with him as the only thing that mattered about food: who had it and who did not. In a city where friends fell out over the merits of rival olive oils or the correct way to prepare a confit of duck, Nelly's lack of interest in what she ate was bracing.

(44)

Despite his admiration for Nelly's frugality, so unAustralian and anachronistic does it appear to Tom that it arouses his suspicions, and he fears that it might, just like her Chineseness, be a sham, "stagy as a pirouette" (48).

Moreover, while remaining aware of the fallacy of the equation, Tom perceives money, and how it is spent, as a measure of human emotion. We can recall, for instance, his concerns regarding Nelly's choice of a gift that she had refashioned for her friend: a fifty-cent necklace she found at the flea market, then restrung and fitted with a new catch. It is a gift that evokes nostalgia, reminding Tom of hand-made, makeshift gifts of his childhood in India: "Bazaar handkerchiefs embellished with lace or stitched monograms in the weeks leading up to Christmas, of birthday greetings fashioned from images cut from hoarded foreign cards and glued to coloured cardboard with flour-and-water paste" (73). He is able to appreciate that Nelly's gift was "enriched with her labour" and that it was more than an impersonal link "in a disaffected chain of production and consumption" as it "bore a human tang" (73). But at the same time, Tom cannot rid himself of the feeling that what *really* matters is how much was paid for the original necklace, and it is this price, the actual money exchanged, that is representative of the gift's real worth, and that it ultimately devalues Nelly's relationship with her friend: "All the same, he thought, she spent fifty cents on Yelena" (73). Tom's

understanding of the role of the material in human relationships is marked also by the suspicion that money is the underlying motivation for acts which ostensibly stem from friendship and goodwill. For instance, when Nelly lends him her house so that he can finish work on his monograph, despite being moved by her concern for his well-being, he finds himself doubting the sincerity of her offer and thinks: “she wants the money” (4).

The disposable Australian?

The ease with which modern society disposes of goods is a major concern for Tom, and he is struck, as we saw above, by Nelly’s departure from this seemingly all-encompassing norm. He cannot help but notice, as he watches her chop zucchini, the way she trims the “scanty flesh” from around the stem “that anyone else would have discarded” (48). This echoes an observation made by Ravi, another immigrant from South Asia, in De Kretser’s later novel *Questions of Travel*, who “couldn’t get over the things people threw away in Australia. Bedsteads, TVs, tennis balls, mattresses, couches, T-shirts, toys: in Sri Lanka, there were many who would take these pavements for a showroom” (2012: 308). I contend that Tom’s preoccupation with the ready Australian tendency to deem things unwanted, reflects and heightens his underlying concern with the idea and practice of exclusion in Australia, and highlights his fear of being ejected from the country — a fear that is compounded as he watches a series of refugee crises unfold along Australian shores in the year 2001.

In theory, as Tsiolkas has noted, capitalist globalization annihilates tradition, smashes the borders of the nation state, allows the free flow of capital, ideas and trade [...] This most ruthless form of capitalism, in promising us the freedom to identify as part of a global community, makes the nation state

itself obsolete [...] but when it comes to dealing with the most manifest development of this globalisation, the displacement and homelessness of millions of people around the globe, we are then told we must secure our borders, that we have to affirm our nationhood. We require border patrols, detention centres, checkpoints and passport controls. (2008: 5–6)

Tom becomes acutely aware of the violence perpetrated by the state in order to protect “a line drawn in the water”, as he witnesses on television first the Tampa incident in August 2001, followed by the sinking of SIEV X two months later, which resulted in the death of 353 people who had sailed from Indonesia and were presumably seeking refugee status in Australia (208). SIEV X “sank in waters patrolled by Australian forces that did not come to the aid of the stricken vessel and its passengers” (Pavlidis, 2013: 234). Despite being an Australian national, and though his documented status is in no tangible danger, these events unleash a latent fear in him and reinforce his feelings of uncertainty, rooted in the belief that he does not belong in Australia and will sooner or later be found out as the alien within who must be discarded: “Fear put out live shoots in Tom. Instantly identifiable as foreign matter, he feared being labelled waste. He feared expulsion from the body of the nation” (209). While happy to see an increasing number of South Asians immigrating and settling in Australia, he fears that he might find himself among the many who are still awaiting immigration and permission to become Australian citizens.

Whenever he thought of the waiting going on around the globe, Tom was afraid. He feared that the ground of his life would give way; that he would fall into a room where, powerless as a figurine, he would have nothing to do but wait. Transformed into a human commodity, he would find himself competing with thousands of identical products, all waiting to be chosen. It was an irrational,

potent dread. (146)

Given that he appears to see consumerism as a significant aspect of Australianess, and given capitalist modernity's "peculiar affection for fixed categories of value/worthlessness", it is no coincidence that this apprehension is articulated in the language of commodification and market competition (Dini, 2016a: 9). Moreover, who has to wait and struggle to gain entry into Australia, and who is welcomed with open arms by the state, is dictated not merely by racial but also by market considerations, as Helga Ramsey-Kurz (2017: n.p.) has persuasively argued when comparing the country's punitive policies directed at destitute asylum seekers with the creation of special visa sub-classes to facilitate the entry of "millionaire migrants".

Wenche Ommundsen has noted that the works of fiction by De Kretser and other Asian-Australian writers such as Azhar Abidi and Suneeta Peres da Costa present readers with complex literary "responses" that "are specific to this moment in Australia's history, such as the constant questioning of historical record and national/cultural identity, and a strong sense of the ambiguous interplay of memory and forgetting which informs the present and our construction of the past" (2011: 509). Indeed, as Tom is only too aware, the refugee crises of the year 2001 are deeply reminiscent of and rooted in the exclusionary politics that characterized nation-building in Australia over many preceding decades, in particular the injustices perpetrated against Aboriginal peoples but also the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901, which consolidated the "White Australia Policy", effectively prohibiting non-white immigration until its abolition in 1973 (Meredith and Dryster, 1999: 210). And as Tom cannot help but realize, this political discourse, long after its formal abolition, "continues to maintain its indelible impress on Australian society" and imagination (Jayasuria, 2012: xiii). The year 2001 represents a distillation of this sensibility and as

he witnesses the refugees' plight on television, "time turned translucent. Old things moved just beneath its surface, familiar and strange as a known face glimpsed under water" (264).

Lyn Dickens argues that Tom's fear of expulsion is symptomatic of his "own experience of racial and insidious trauma" as well as "representative of the wider tensions in Australia regarding national identity and border control, the preservation of whiteness and the containment and control of racial difference" (2015: 96). I would add that this fear of being deemed expendable and undesirable is brought to the fore by what is described in the novel as Australian society's "endless rage for the new", and its dismissal of objects which are "out of date [...] humble fragments from the wreck of modernity" (223). After all, waste lies at the heart of consumer capitalism which is predicated, as Rachele Dini points out, "on the finite lifespan of objects" (2016b: 6). Not surprisingly, the televised images of the bodies of drowned asylum seekers, "broken, burned, fished lifeless from the sea", become inseparable in Tom's mind from discarded objects that he encounters on a daily basis in the streets of Melbourne and which now take on particularly sinister overtones:

an orange divan stripped of cushions; collapsed hoovers, torn flyscreens, a backless TV [...] Rusty barbecues might have strayed from a torturer's repertoire. There were contraptions for improving muscle tone, computer keyboards fanned in a magazine rack, plastic flowerpots packed with grey earth. It was like leafing through snapshots of a civilisation's unconscious. (209)

The narrator's use of words such as "stripped", "collapsed", "torn", and "torturer" evoke the violence inherent in the rejection of objects and human beings deemed worthless by modern society. As Connor Ryan has pointed out, "the garbage heap can be viewed as an archive, an archeological trove. Society's cast offs offer a window into everyday life,

which make us question what we retain as well as what we let go, refuse, and reject outright” (2013: 53).

Human waste too becomes a central preoccupation for Tom as he is confronted with his mother’s advancing years and her incontinence. His anxiety about his mother’s decaying body is heightened by Australian society’s contempt for all things out-of-date. Despite his undeniable love for Iris, Tom prefers to leave her care to Audrey, his aunt, and would rather “write cheques than confront the devastation time had worked on his mother; as a man will make donations to charity the better to turn his face from the misery of the world” (60). De Kretser has elsewhere argued that excrement is “a sign of everything that we would rather not see and rather not deal with in society [...]. But it is also a sign of everything that we consider unhygienic. And of course hygiene is very connected with modernity, with progress. Dirt is a sign of the primitive” (2007: n.p.). As he watches Iris’s body fail, it brings with it the spectre of out-of-dateness or what the narrator calls an “unmodern life”, which is evocative of Tom’s Indian past: one that is “odorous, unhygienic, surplus, refusing to be disposed of with decent haste” (136). Iris herself, in a sense, comes to represent an out-of-date element in his life, resisting easy disposal. In particular, while filled with remorse about wanting to put his mother in a nursing home, Tom appears to see her refusal to move as a rejection of modernity itself. He is deeply envious of his ex-wife whose parents, in anticipation of the infirmity that would come with old age, inform her in a “brisk, practical” manner that “they had inspected a range of what they termed *low and high care facilities*, and entered into agreements with suitable establishments” (229, emphasis in the original). To quell his guilt, and hoping that she would condone the option, he shares with Nelly his plan of putting Iris in an institution for the elderly (despite the fact that its mere mention reduces Iris to tears). To his surprise, Nelly responds by voicing a distinctly “unmodern”

solution: she suggests that he should bring his mother to his own house to live with him. But it is a proposition that Tom is quick to dismiss, as he sees it as being completely incompatible with the modern life that he is so determined to adopt.

Tom's desire to embrace modernity also makes him impatient with his mother's religious and superstitious tendencies, as he appears to wish for an existence which, in Weber's words, is "disenchanted" and does not allow for the existence of "mysterious incalculable forces" (1991 [1948]: 139). He accuses Iris of being "irrational", and struggles to recognize that "superstition might be an expression of humility, an admission that knowledge is limited and possibility infinite" (173). Nevertheless, he is conscious of the enduring human need for spirituality and is aware that consumer products serve a quasi-religious purpose, giving individuals hope and lending meaning to their lives: "Isolated, spotlighted, displayed in glass niches, everyday objects took on fetishistic power, a vase or a pair of shoes acquiring the aura once enjoyed by religious icons. Such things could mean whatever people needed. They were repositories of dreams" (72). "The advent of modernity", as Saurabh Dube argues (2009:1), "insinuates the disenchantment of the world [...] yet, the processes of modernity create their own enchantments". The modern enchantments that speak to Tom include neon signs, specifically a sign advertising a banal consumer product: Skipping Girl Vinegar. Adorno has described neon signs as "technicized forms of modern consciousness [...] which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own", and he sees them as "comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death" (2003: 96). Upon first encountering it, the young Tom had found the Skipping Girl Vinegar sign "dazzling as novelty" (223). Paradoxically, as a teenager, he had also been aware that the sign "violated something inviolable" and was an intrusion upon nature, but then had quickly become accustomed to this "invasion of the sky by commerce" (201). Much

later, having met Nelly, and having witnessed her work as an artist, he is struck by the crassness of the sign which, without the light “animating” it, appears “corpse-like” to him, and he sees the neon as a screen which cloaks “the grubby relationship between buyer and seller with obscuring magic” (279). This observation underscores Tom’s growing disaffection with the emblems of a consumerist lifestyle; he divines in the skipping girl “a constellation of impressions, metaphors, quicksilver glints” (222), as this gleaming modern image becomes problematized in the face of “the evidence of decay” in Nelly’s photographs of urban landscapes. Her work compels him to see beyond the seemingly incongruous categories of old/new, beautiful/ugly and even modern/unmodern:

Rubbish overflowing a bin, weeds pushing through concrete, broken or missing tiles. The cracked, outdated faces of seventies and eighties buildings. These signs told of a city that was neither ancient nor exactly new, but mutable. Inscribed within them was the memory of the maggoty cheeses and rotten fruit once painted into still lifes as warnings against excess and reminders of the transience of earthly splendour. (155–156)

If Tom’s flight into modernity and his choice of an academic career have entailed a resolute privileging of the intellect and the rational, but also of all that is new and glossy, Nelly’s work seems to reject this hierarchy and forces him to address the decay that modernity cannot quite jettison, and upon which “progress” ultimately rests. De Kretser (2007: n.p.) has pointed out that Tom’s is a “questing, restless kind of intelligence. What it misses in the world is precisely that kind of attentiveness to ordinariness and just appreciation without having to investigate.” When the dog is recovered towards the end of the novel, Tom informs Nelly that his mother had been praying to Saint Anthony for its safe return. Instead of scepticism, Nelly’s response reveals her acceptance of the

possible power of faith and her refusal to intellectualize the act of prayer:

Tom said, “My mother says it’s a miracle. She’s been praying to Saint Anthony.”

“Well, there you go then” (263).

Moreover, Nelly compels him to revisit the notion of waste, including what constitutes wasted, unproductive time in modern society. When their search for the lost dog yields no results for several days, Tom suggests that Nelly return to the city as “there was no point in both of [them] wasting [their] time” (255). But her response calls for a reconsideration of the modern need to “squeeze activity, efficiency, productivity out of every minute” (Charney, 1998: 81): “So let’s say he’s dead. Don’t you want to keep looking anyway? We can still take him home” (255). Nelly realizes also that the logic of “nowist” consumption informs Tom’s way of looking at art: Bauman has argued that the motive to hurry underpinning nowist consumerist life “is partly the urge to *acquire* and *collect*. But the most pressing need that makes haste truly imperative is nevertheless the necessity to *discard* and *replace*” (2007: 36; emphasis in the original). Tom, Nelly notes as she watches him as he looks at a series of paintings, “had a gobbling eye”, and it is under her influence that he learns to “look slowly” (110).

In his search for a sense of belonging in Australia, Tom comes to recognize that modern consumerism and even intellectualization can provide only temporary relief. It is through Nelly, the ways she lives as well as how she works, that he begins to see modernity in general and the modern city in particular in a new light and, in De Kretser’s words (2007: n.p.), learns to be “attentive to other ways of apprehending the world”. As he examines Nelly’s photographs of urban Australian landscapes, featuring “freeways, multi-story car parks, super-markets, fast-food outlets”, he is able to discern not only the “assertive beauty” of these constructions that are “essential to the functioning of large cities” but also the violence that they entail, including violence

against the environment: something of which, as discussed above, he had been instinctively aware as a teenager (155). Gazing at some of the images captured by Nelly he “found himself looking at a city envisioned as the scene of a crime” (155). As the author herself has pointed out, Nelly’s art serves to “rescue the meaninglessness of the world, the banality of the world” (De Kretser, 2007: n.p.). Nelly’s work complicates, rather than represents a rejection of, modernity: as Tom observes, “more potent than any sign was his sense that, as an artist, she inhabited the modern age, the age of the image, while he was marooned in words” (71). It is also Nelly who, as discussed earlier, refuses to endorse his attempts to extricate himself from the ramifications of his mother’s bodily and mental degeneration. Nelly’s character and her artistic creations help Tom to reformulate his perception of, and relationship with, various kinds of degeneration and waste that he seems to have spent his adult life doggedly refusing to confront.

Tom’s friendship with Nelly and his engagement with her work bring in their wake a shift in how he imagines inclusion and belonging in Australia, and allow him to come to grips with the joys as well as the serious limitations and complexities of capitalist modernity. As the novel draws to a close, Tom seems to more tangibly define himself by his relationships with other beings, rather than things. His thoughts become increasingly focused on his dog, who reappears alive if emaciated, and on Nelly, and tellingly the novel’s closing words are addressed to his frail mother whom he reassures by saying: ““I won’t let you fall”” (285). This contrasts sharply with Tom’s reaction at the beginning of the novel, when he had responded to Iris’s fear of falling with impatience and had exhorted her to be “sensible” (56). In drawing attention to the ways in which the precariousness of the diasporic condition can be compounded by manufactured wants and desires that underpin global capitalist modernity, *The Lost Dog* also brings to the fore the necessity of recognizing and fulfilling the basic need for love.

Without rejecting the “wonder and enchantment and magic that the modern city offers its inhabitants” (De Kretser, 2007: n.p.), and without denying the serious implications of race in contemporary Australia, the novel’s ending presents love and relationships, whether human or otherwise, as an ameliorant, perhaps the only one, that can ease Tom’s anxieties about his identity as an immigrant.

Notes

¹ Subsequent references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

² A video recording of the interview is available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X11ATMnAkgo>

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